

Poems - Alberta

# **A TALE OF THE EARLY YEARS**

Dedicated To All South Edmonton Pioneers

By Zola Isabell Campbell

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In Memory of  
My Parents  
MR. AND MRS. D. L. CAMPBELL

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## A TALE OF THE EARLY YEARS

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I have written this tale of the early years  
For all our South Edmonton pioneers  
Who would like to preserve a record in verse  
Of how they accepted for better or worse  
The ups and the downs of fortune and weather  
When they and the west were young together,  
As seen through the eyes, as I ought to state,  
Of a teen-age tenderfoot of ninety-eight.  
Although, with this record I seem to entwine  
A rather full history of me and mine,  
You will see it is really a story in rhyme  
Of a typical family of that time.  
But now let me say between you and me  
I know that my verse isn't poetry.  
Its sameness is tiresome and you will find  
If you happen to have a critical mind,  
The meter dependent on matter or mood,  
The rhythm uneven, the rhyming oft crude.  
In fact I have rather relished the crime  
Of using at times a low brow rhyme  
That would make you see in the wink of an eye  
Some scene enacted in the days gone by.  
And now I will say without further ado,  
"South Edmonton pioneers, here's to you!  
And to all of the pioneers of the west,  
Many of whom have gone to their rest."  
It was in the spring of the year ninety-eight  
A very important historical date—  
That I was brought out these many long miles  
From where I had parked all my maiden smiles,  
To this small burg with its tri-weekly mail,  
This jumping off place for the Klondyke trail.  
When we had arrived at our journey's end  
In the wee small hours, no welcoming friend  
Awaited us here and the word got around  
That the town was full—no rooms to be found.  
So, knowing not where we might be housed,  
We shouldered the wee 'uns from sleep aroused,  
And, bearing our luggage, with weary tread  
We trudged up the street to find us a bed.  
But we were luckier than we knew,  
For we found a suite with a Main Street view

In the Klondyke Lodging House, no less—  
A picturesque spot, as you might guess.  
But the genial host was exceedingly kind,  
For the rooms to which we were assigned  
Were really his own—just finished that day.  
The blankets were new but a very dark gray,  
And the bunks were of lumber, unplanned but new.  
From the gunny sack mattress the hay peeked through.  
The Slumber King spring had resigned his throne,  
Leaving the Ostermoor reigning alone;  
But with spring all about, as some one said,  
What need had we of one in our bed.  
Next day we went searching all up and down  
The muddy streets of this old south town;  
No furnished rooms! No house! No shack!  
So I foolishly hoped that we might go back.  
But we found a wee shack at long and at last  
At the close of the day when hope seemed past:—  
Unpainted, unplastered and much undersized.  
And we moved right in as we were advised.  
Our household goods were on the way  
And they might arrive most any day.  
The town was o'er flowing, we were told  
With those who were planning to go after gold.  
They were buying their dogs, their sleds and loads,  
And soon they would take to the open roads.  
But now they were walking around in the slush  
Until time to start off on the "Klondyke Rush."  
Then too there were many queer men about,  
With their sheepskin coats turned inside out;  
While the women wore theirs turned outside in,  
With head handkerchiefs tied under the chin,  
With wide gathered skirts and high top boots.  
And every train brought other recruits.  
They were nearly all waiting the word to go  
When the land would be cleared of a recent snow.  
But beside all these people who came and went  
There were many who seemed to be well content  
To stay right here their whole lives through,  
And they said we would get to like it too.  
Did I like it then? Decidedly, not!  
And never would either, or so I then thought.  
I hated the mud, the sloughs, the coyotes' calls,  
The unplastered shack with mice in its walls,

The wee dark stores on the town's best streets,  
The lack of good sidewalks under our feet.  
One block of sidewalk was all that we had,  
One block for daily promenade.  
I missed the big city's bustle and noise,  
The friends who had shared my sorrows and joys  
The far away home that I long had known,  
Where things had places of their own,  
Instead of being deep down in trunks,  
And beds were beds and never bunks.  
Our new found friends were worthy the name,  
They were kind and good but just the same  
I hated to hear them by day and by night  
Keep bragging to us of the prospects bright.  
They came to our house both early and late,  
And oh, how they loved to reiterate—  
That optimistic pioneer band—  
The attractions of this, their promised land.  
And I had to listen to all that they said,  
As I looked at the stars from the loft o'erhead.  
While I fervently wished we were all back home  
They bragged of the soil, that deep, rich loam,  
Of the lovely weather, the nice sunny clime,  
And the fine cool nights of the summer time.  
"The wind never blows," they would solemnly say  
Nor worry a bit if it blew the next day.  
And somebody sure would be telling soon  
That all the rains come in the month of June,  
And stock feed out the whole year through  
And undertakers have nothing to do  
And you're always sleepy and ready to eat  
And mosquitoes bite only the tenderfeet  
And goods would be cheap and stocks up to date  
If it wern't for that ogre which they called freight.  
And thereby a riddle, so strange but true  
Which I shall proceed to be asking you.  
I went to a store a wee sponge to buy  
And asked to be told why the price was high.  
"Because of the freight," he answered me.  
Now which was soused? Was the sponge or he?  
Whenever old-timers got together  
They always talked of the crops and the weather.  
And if they were cold they would conceal it  
As they gravely assured us, "You never feel it."

For whatever the weather they always conceded  
It was just the thing the country needed.  
They bragged of the size of the farmer's fields  
And dwelt at length on the soil's big yields;  
They spoke of the height of the garden crops  
And bade you to note the potato tops,  
And early in June when a bad frost came  
They went on bragging just the same.  
They said those tops were far too high.  
It was just what they needed to wilt and die—  
That the crop would be better because of the blight,  
(And worst of it was they seemed to be right.)  
They talked of the gold in the river's sands,  
So easily garnered by willing hands.  
They bragged of the vast deposits of coal  
And dared you to discover a "better 'ole."  
Then orators sprang up like prairie flowers  
All ready to talk for hours and hours  
With fluttering hands and glowing faces  
Of all those glorious wide open spaces  
That lay in wait, as with outstretched hands,  
For the homeless people of all the lands.  
And after a time we all learned to know  
Just when they would pause a moment or so  
And ask you to list to the distant hum  
Of the millions of settlers yet to come.  
Then, leaving us there to count the tally,  
Would sweep along to the grand finale,  
When they spoke to us with a solemn air,  
In lowered tones, of the privilege rare,  
Of lending a hand, of having a share  
In digging and laying true and four square  
Foundations for this last best west,  
Foundations that would stand the test,  
That, stone by stone, and tier by tier,  
This "far-flung bit of empire" here  
Might rise in beauty through the years—  
A monument to our pioneers.  
We heard such speeches o'er and o'er,  
Beside the stove in the country store,  
At picnics and concerts, in public squares,  
From platforms and pulpits, at meetings and fairs.  
And especially orators from the east,  
(Who expected to stay for a day at least)

Would set their audiences all astir  
As they told us all how lucky we were.  
"You're telling us! Now ain't that queer,"  
Might have been the reply of the pioneer.  
"That's what you think! Lucky, my eye!"  
Would have suited a tenderfoot such as I;  
But we hadn't heard those sayings then,  
When the west was young. "Ah, woeful when!"  
Nor did they need them, that pioneer crew,  
In order the subject to further pursue.  
As compared with them, those eastern boosters  
Were about as effective as bantam roosters.  
Oh, yes they were boosters, our pioneers  
Away, way back in those early years.  
But yet, to the tenderfoot they were kind,  
Although there were laws which he had to mind.  
He must do as the Romans do in Rome,  
And not keep harping on 'Ome sweet 'Ome.  
They gave him so long to dry out his wings,  
To sort of get on to the hang of things,  
And then if he still was feeling "high hat,"  
He could jump in the lake and that was that.  
But most of the folk who came here to stay  
Soon took to the life in a wonderful way.  
Though gathered here from all the world's lanes  
They mostly had pioneer blood in their veins;  
And so you would find, in maybe a year,  
The tenderfoot turned to a pioneer.  
If you heard him telling some raw recruit,  
"No, the wind never blows!" nor giving a hoot  
If his hat blew off in a sudden gale  
Before he had finished his windy tale.  
You would know he had passed his pioneer test  
And was fit to be numbered along with the rest.  
But hardships were many and luxuries few,  
Yes, very few, I am telling you;  
For things as necessities, now defined  
Were then to the luxury list assigned.  
So fathers worked hard on simple fare,  
And mothers on tinfoil rolled their hair,  
Which makes them impatient now no doubt,  
(As they think of the things they did without.)  
With the agitator on relief  
Who demands his caviar as well as beef,

And his wife her regular permanent,  
As well as food and clothes and rent.  
(With no reflections intended or made  
On honest folk in need of aid.)  
But now once more I must take you back  
To that ugly unfinished, unfurnished, shack,  
Unplastered, unpainted, un-everything,  
To which we moved that night in the spring.  
Strangers we were and all unprepared  
For the hardships that all old-timers shared.  
But our neighbors, bless them! were neighbors indeed  
And only too pleased to serve our need.  
One lent us a table and one some chairs  
And one a wee bench that was given to airs;  
For, unless we would sit on the seat just so,  
In spite of our yells over backward we'd go.  
Thus we managed to live for a week or two  
Till our household effects at last came through.  
Our first summer here on the whole was dry  
And they called it hot,—we didn't see why.  
For hot was hot, where we came from,  
So we waited all summer for summer to come,  
And we waited all night for the day to end  
For the twilight to come and darkness descend.  
When early in May, three days in a row  
There came a heavy fall of snow,  
Just after the ground was newly seeded,  
We decided to take the next day's train  
Until we heard that old time refrain,  
"It's just the thing the country needed."  
The June rains came as they said they would,  
But a frost came too which wasn't so good.  
The fall was lovely we had to agree  
With skies every day as blue as could be  
And the trees in the valley, in wine and jade,  
A resplendent regiment on parade.  
The winter was tardy a bit that year  
And when it came, not very severe.  
We moved to a house in the early fall,  
And really it wasn't too bad at all.  
With our goods unpacked from barrel and crate  
At last we had room to circulate.  
With our straw lined carpets tacked to the floors,  
And white lace curtains at windows and doors,



With a cloth on the table, a shine on the stove,  
And geranium slips in the front alcove,  
With mother all dressed in her black silk gown  
When callers came from country and town,  
The year ambled by as e'en first years will  
And while we were often quite homesick, still  
We were feeling better and learned to know  
That you find fine folk wherever you go.

### The Church

We started to Knox when first we came,  
Which was Presbyterian then by name.  
I went to Sunday School as well as church.  
And to Christian Endeavor for further research.  
The church was homey and neat, though small,  
With coal-oil lamps adorning each wall,  
With a nice red carpet on pulpit and stairs,  
A pulpit desk and some red plush chairs.  
Now the church was crowded the whole year through  
As longer and longer the church roll grew.  
So you had to go early or else you would find  
They would march you up front nor say, "Do you mind?"  
They would march you up front, your cheeks on fire,  
To those seats running lengthwise adjoining the choir.  
But all this belongs to a different rhyme  
Which I may finish some other time.

### The School

In the early fall when the school began,  
Reluctantly, I joined the school going clan.  
A four room schoolhouse of brick veneer  
Was the home of Public and High that year.  
One teacher and only one room for the High,  
Which caused me many a homesick sigh,  
For the school where I had hoped to matriculate,  
Was once the Capitol Building of the state.  
It was set in a lovely parklike square,  
Was four stories high with a circular stair.  
No wonder I grieved at the radical change.  
The curriculum also to me was strange.  
To the choice of one's course one gave no thought,  
For the teacher's course was the only one taught—  
Three classes with fifteen subjects each  
And only one teacher those subjects to teach.

Then, as to the lab, we had nary a thing  
But a magnet, a pith ball and a silk string.  
And yet our record was one of the best  
Of all the schools of the whole North West.  
You may attribute that as you will  
To the pupil's brains or the teacher's skill.

### Sights and Scenes

Of course there were interesting sights and scenes  
In those pioneer days for folk in their teens.  
In the early spring ere the snow had gone  
On the river flats there were races on,  
When the Klondyke hikers trained their dogs,  
All fitted out in their sourdough togs.  
And someone was always washing for gold  
On the banks of the river in days of old.  
The old log fort on the north side hill  
Was standing then (as it should be still),  
And Walter's mill on the southern side,  
While the ferries that backward and forward plied,  
In summertime were the only bond  
Twixt the north side town and the world beyond:  
When first we came to this promised land  
No bridges, then, our river spanned,  
Though workmen were busily laying the piers  
Of the Low Level Bridge of later years,  
Which had to be raised by six feet or so  
After the big ninety-nine overflow.  
Of course on the twenty-fourth day of May  
The schoolchildren threatened to run away  
Unless they were given a holiday,  
And the Indians came to town for a stay.  
They camped all along the Old Calgary Trail—  
The young and the old, the strong and the frail,  
With squaw and brave and little papoose,  
With cart and tepee, dogs and cayouse.  
And every night to the tom-tom's beat  
They would grunt and dance on the town's best street.  
In the summertime when the fairs came along  
You always would see a picturesque throng  
Of Indians looking solemn and grim  
And mounted policemen, dapper and trim,  
What a wonderful sight was the mountie, too  
On his noble steed in scarlet and blue.

The cowboy also would be on hand,  
And folk from many a far off land  
In native costumes fashioned with care—  
A colorful scene was the old Edmonton Fair.  
In the winter time in the pioneer days,  
Instead of cars we had cutters and sleighs  
And many jumpers, some trim and neat,  
While others beside them on the street  
Were constructed of boxes that once held soap,  
And drawn by oxen with harness of rope.  
In the summertime the roads were lined  
With democrats of every kind,  
Red River carts and a motley crew  
Of wagons and buggies old and new.  
And horses there were of every breed  
From a shaggy cayouse to a mountie's steed.  
But very few horses of today  
Are talked of more than was Hulbert's gray.  
And no conveyance at any resort  
Compares with that turnout from the Fort.  
No wonder we gazed as it passed us by  
With the narrow democrat shiny and high,  
The proudly stepping and satiny team,  
With their silvery harness all agleam,  
And the mountie moguls, grand and proud,  
Unheedful (?) of the admiring crowd.  
Then worthy too of a place in our song  
Was that stately vehicle low and long,  
That lovely carriage a la mode,  
In which the lordly nobles rode,  
With its four horse team so tightly reigned,  
And the liveried coachman that appertained.  
Remember our four horse tally-ho  
That took us where we wished to go,  
To concerts or picnics or anywhere  
When the urge for fun was in the air.

### Social Phase

And now we come to the social phase  
Of life in the west in the early days.  
There were tennis and ball games then as now,  
And once in a while a neighborhood row.  
And then, just to meet the tri-weekly train  
Was a pleasure that never seemed to wane.

So all who were free would always flock down  
To welcome the newcomers to the town,  
Nor did they mind that deafening din  
The bus drivers made when the train pulled in.  
There were dances for those who wished to dance,  
And I suppose there were games of chance.  
But, as I recall those days, I think  
That our home, our school, our church and the rink  
Were each in themselves a central sun  
Around which circled our teen-age fun.  
Church concerts and socials, plays and teas,  
And at Christmas time, our Christmas trees  
Were all of them held in old Ross Hall  
Where many good times were had by all,  
With "Jacob and Rachael" and "Musical Chairs,"  
With promenades or marching in pairs  
With puzzles and games to make you think  
And, oh boy, how some folk could wink!  
I remember one play, "The Temple of Fame,"  
With local artists producing the same.  
Now that was a play that was up to date,  
With beautiful ladies in dresses to mate,  
With quarreling stars and all of the rest  
That are found in companies of the best.  
Fine concerts we had in old Ross Hall  
And many great artists came there to call:—  
"Pauline Johnson," "Ben Gough" and "Gavin Spence,"  
And "Jessie MacLaughlin,"—wasn't she immense,  
Wi' her "Hunnered Pipers and A' and A',"  
And, hoot mon, did she no look braw!  
As to her singing, the oldtimers tell  
That her voice was heard as clear as a bell  
Right down to the corner of Maine and Whyte  
When she sang in Knox that summer night.  
We had artists too of our very own,  
Whose names and talents were then well known,  
And the popular hits of the pioneers  
Are often still heard in these later years,  
But the favorite songs that then were sung  
Were the songs that were old when we were young.  
We had a few picnics now and again  
In spite of mosquitoes and hail and rain,  
And when we wished for a change of scene  
We rode out or drove to some nearby ravine;—

White Mud or Black, Mill Creek or Groat,  
And sometimes we boarded Walter's boat  
And went for a daylight or moonlight cruise  
In picnic parties or just by twos.  
But if we wished to put on some style  
We went down to Banff to camp for a while,  
Or sometimes we journeyed to Aspen Beach.  
If neither of these was within our reach,  
(Though little lakes, like bows on a gown,  
Were scattered all over our south side town  
In the rainy years), our tents we would take  
To White or Black Mud or Sandy Lake.  
Alberta, Seba and Cooking, strange to say,  
Were almost unknown in my young day.  
Now the half of this tale would not be told  
If I left out one famous place of old.  
You talk about your caucus rings  
Where you pick your leaders and settle things,  
You talk about your paper debates  
Like "The Sinking Fund" versus "The Rates,"  
We didn't need those in days of yore  
When the old guard met in Hulbert's store  
To read "The Mail and Empire" and "The Globe"  
And all the affairs of state to probe,  
To discuss the late news from Ladysmith,  
Or whom so and so was going with,  
Or the respective merits of Laurier,  
Or Tupper or Foster or Sir John A.  
I suppose there was also much talk about,  
Those sheepskin coats turned inside out,  
And oft they would speak of real estate,  
And likewise of prices, especially freight,  
While those who returned from the Klondyke hike  
Would doubtless each tell of some lucky strike,  
But the subject to enkindle the hottest flame  
Would certainly be the last hockey game.  
The rink was uncovered in ninety-eight.  
The covered was built at a later date.  
And many whose heads are now turning grey  
Were grand march leaders in their day.  
That covered rink was our pride and joy  
But, at hockey matches, then, Oh boy!  
The place became just a boxing ring,  
An Irish fair or some such thing,

Especially when we went out to play  
The north side town on a Christmas day.  
Our team was composed of brothers and sons,  
And oh, how we hated old Edmonton's.  
I remember the season, beginning nought two  
When we were victorious nearly all through.  
The north side boys were good, I suppose,  
But, sakes alive! They were mortal foes  
And oh how we grinned when they couldn't keep tab  
Of those long-legged fellows, Harold and Ab.  
I remember the night, when, like "Billy the Norman,"  
Bringing a referee called Mr. ————,  
They came o'er the water to do or to die,  
And feeling was certainly running high  
When he seemed to favor the north-side town?  
In a second the fans had all swooped down  
To fight it out on the ice below.  
So the referee thought it was time to go  
And he started off for his bus near by,  
Pursued by a bunch of the younger fry.  
'Twas late in the season—gone was the snow—  
Vainly they looked for something to throw.  
Then each of them seemed with one accord  
To remember his precious marble horde.  
So away went many a marble and alley  
In a very exciting last moment rally.  
"Disgraceful!" you say. Yes, yes, I suppose,  
But, without the movies and radios  
They couldn't buy the big fights canned  
Nor could they view them second hand.

### The Conclusion

But, now ere I bring to a close this lay  
Of events and scenes of an earlier day,  
I'll ask you to join me if you will  
As I go to the top of the river hill;  
For our river vale, just like a vast stage  
Has presented the changes from age to age,  
As well as the seasons that come and go,  
The sunrise scenes and the sunset's glow.  
But come with me now and let us look down  
From the river bank of the old south town  
On that amphitheater there in the vale  
And see in review that stirring tale

Of trappers, explorers; of Blackfeet and Crees,  
Bringing their furs to the companies  
At their frequently moved and rival posts  
Whose well trained factors acted as hosts;  
The permanent fort with its palisade;  
The barges that formed the York Brigade;  
The river steamers, adventurers bold,  
So eagerly welcomed by young and old;  
The ferries that travelled over and back;  
The races run on the old race track;  
The volunteers brave who guarded the gate  
Till the regular troops arrived in state;  
The mounties on horseback riding by,  
Or in their democrat shiny and high—  
Efficient, resourceful, brave and cool;  
The very first churches; The very first school;  
The stages and buses and tallyho,  
And that four-horse carriage long and low;  
The homeseekers' wagons, climbing the hills;  
The logs floating down to the lumber mills;  
The big gold dredges seeking to wrest  
The river's gold from its watery nest;  
The panners, preferring the simpler way,  
And reaping their small rewards each day;  
The Klondyke hikers drilling their teams;  
Preparing to leave for northern streams;  
The Low Level Bridge; the flood; the trains;  
The Boer War soldiers there on the plains;  
The rousing games on the open squares;  
The very colorful old time fairs;  
The picnic parties from both the towns;  
The pleasure boats, their ups and downs;  
The great historical celebration;—  
"The grand Provincial Inauguration";  
The steps that served to shorten the climb;  
The "Lift" that lasted so short a time;  
The Capitol Building, being erected;

The historical Fort, torn down—rejected;  
The yearly drowning tragedies;  
Those motor boat fatalities;  
The street cars starting on their rounds;  
The gala scenes on the Parliament grounds;  
The 'Varsity Buildings—of learning the seat;  
The High Level Bridge—an accomplished feat;  
The second flood—the trouble it made;  
The Great War soldiers on parade.

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But here I will turn from the scenes in the vale,  
And leave all the rest of the moving tale  
To my successors, the younger rhymers,  
As now I say "Farewell, old timers!"